WORDS on PLAYS

INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

The Constant Wife

BY W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM
DIRECTED BY KYLE DONNELLY
GEARY THEATER
MARCH 27–APRIL 27, 2003

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CHARACTERS AND SYNOPSIS OF *THE CONSTANT WIFE*

*The Constant Wife* was first performed in Cleveland, Ohio, in November 1926 and opened on Broadway at Maxine Elliott’s Theatre on November 29, 1926.

### CHARACTERS

(in order of appearance)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characters</th>
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<tr>
<td>Mrs. Culver, <em>a middle-aged matron</em></td>
<td>Beth Dixon</td>
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<td>Bentley, <em>the Middletons’ butler</em></td>
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<td>Martha Culver, <em>Mrs. Culver’s younger daughter</em></td>
<td>Emily Ackerman</td>
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<td>Barbara Fawcett, <em>a friend of Constance</em></td>
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<td>Constance Middleton, <em>Mrs. Culver’s elder daughter</em></td>
<td>Ellen Karas</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marie-Louise Durham, <em>a friend of the Middletons</em></td>
<td>Ashley West</td>
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<tr>
<td>John Middleton, F.R.C.S., <em>Constance’s husband</em></td>
<td>Jonathan Fried</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bernard Kersal, <em>Constance’s former beau</em></td>
<td>Mark Elliot Wilson</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mortimer Durham, <em>Marie-Louise’s husband</em></td>
<td>Charles Dean</td>
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### PLACE AND TIME

*The Constant Wife* takes place in the Middletons’ house in Harley Street, a fashionable area of London, during the late 1920s.

**ACT I.** Mrs. Culver is waiting to speak to her elder daughter, Constance, when her younger daughter, Martha, shows up unexpectedly. Martha has found out that Constance’s husband, John, is having an affair with Constance’s best friend, Marie-Louise, and Martha is determined to break the news to her sister. Mrs. Culver, on the other hand, thinks it’s only natural for men to be unfaithful and doesn’t want to upset Constance by forcing her to face the truth.

Barbara Fawcett, Constance’s friend, arrives, wanting to offer Constance a job in her interior decorating business. The three women discuss whether or not Constance should know about her husband’s affair, and what she might do if she does find out. When Constance comes in, however, Martha isn’t able to reveal the affair before Marie-Louise appears. John then joins the group, and he and Marie-Louise carry on as if they were merely friends. As Martha and Marie-Louise leave, Constance agrees to consider Barbara’s job offer.
Left alone with Constance at last, Mrs. Culver obliquely tries to offer her support, reminding her daughter that fidelity for men is not the same as fidelity for women. Constance, however, has her mind on a visitor who is about to arrive: Bernard Kersal, an old beau who has been out of the country for 15 years. She asks her mother to stay for his visit, in case he turns out to be awful—but as soon as he appears, he is so obviously “the kind of man one would naturally want to have a heart-to-heart talk with” that she rushes her mother out the door. Bernard confesses that he’s still in love with Constance after all these years. He insists that he doesn’t want to break up her marriage, but he does want her friendship for the year he’ll be in London. She agrees to take him at his word.

ACT II. Two weeks later, Bernard and Constance are about to leave for Ranelagh to watch a game of polo. Martha appears, still determined to reveal the truth about John and Marie-Louise. She tells Bernard about the affair, then ducks into a side room as Constance comes in. Emboldened by this news, Bernard confesses his love once again, but Constance manages to keep him at a distance. She leaves again to put on her hat.

Marie-Louise comes in, very flustered and asking to see John. Bernard leaves as John appears. Marie-Louise tells John that her husband, Mortimer, suspects they are having an affair. Martha and Bernard return as Constance and Mrs. Culver enter; the butler appears to announce that Mortimer is waiting downstairs. Constance has him come up, and he immediately accuses Marie-Louise and John. Constance, however, convinces Mortimer that he has jumped to an unfounded conclusion. Mortimer leaves, mollified and apologetic.

As Marie-Louise and John thank Constance for saving them, Constance reveals that she has known about the affair all along. She was trying to prevent its exposure, so she and John could carry on with their marriage. Marie-Louise leaves to play the wounded wife to Mortimer, and John apologizes to Constance, while Martha and Mrs. Culver argue over how Constance ought to have conducted herself, knowing about the affair as she did. Constance insists that she and John were no longer in love, so there was no reason to be upset about his infidelity. She will not divorce him, but will instead take Barbara’s business offer. Martha, Mrs. Culver, and John leave, perplexed by her attitude. As Constance and Bernard head out for Ranelagh, Constance explains that John, as her husband, pays for her “keep”—food, lodging, and spending money—so she must keep up her end of the bargain by remaining faithful to him. As long as she is financially dependent on John, she must fulfill her role as his wife and chattel.
ACT III. One year later, Constance is getting ready to go on a trip to Italy. She has saved enough money while working for Barbara to take herself on a holiday. Marie-Louise, coincidentally, is returning that day from a yearlong trip around the world with Mortimer. As Martha and Barbara say good-bye to Constance, John comes in, sorry that she is going without him. He asks Constance to tell Marie-Louise that he is not interested in resuming their affair, but when Marie-Louise arrives, she tells Constance that she is not interested in taking up with John again, having met a dashing young A.D.C. to an overseas governor. Constance promises to tell John, and Marie-Louise leaves.

When John reappears, Constance explains that she has put enough money into his bank account to pay for her keep for the past year—and that she is going to Italy with Bernard, but plans to return to John. John is flabbergasted at her brazen infidelity, but manages to interact civilly with Bernard when he shows up pretending to see Constance off on her trip alone. After Bernard leaves—planning to wait for Constance in a taxi—John tries to convince her that he will start carrying on with Marie-Louise again if she goes. Constance tells him about Marie-Louise’s new flame. Nothing he can say can stop Constance from going, and, in the end, he agrees to take her back when she returns.
MAUGHAM KNOWS BEST
An Interview with Director Kyle Donnelly

BY JESSICA WERNER

“It's awful, love, isn't it? Fancy anyone wanting to be in love.”
—W. Somerset Maugham

Perhaps best known to readers today as the author of the semi-autobiographical novels *Of Human Bondage* (1915) and *The Razor's Edge* (1944), W. Somerset Maugham in fact realized his earliest, and arguably greatest, success in his lifetime not for his prose, but for his exceedingly witty and well-crafted plays. Dubbed “the bridge between Wilde and Wilder” for his observant wit, Maugham achieved in the first decades of the 20th century almost unprecedented popularity—and wealth—as a playwright, over the trajectory of his seven decades as a man of letters becoming one of the most successful writers of all time. A.C.T. revisits Maugham’s work for the first time in a quarter century (*The Circle* ran at the Geary Theater in 1978) with his 1926 comedic masterpiece of marital maneuvers, *The Constant Wife*, at the Geary Theater March 27–April 27, staged by nationally renowned director Kyle Donnelly in her A.C.T. directorial debut.

THE NOVEL PLAYWRIGHT
Shortly after the publication of his first novel, *Liza of Lambeth*—written in 1897 while he completed his final year of medical school—Maugham abandoned his medical career, trading the surgeon’s knife for the author's pen to fulfill his dream of becoming a full-time writer. A great admirer of Ibsen, he aspired to write dramas confronting head-on the social issues of his day, yet his early efforts met with only modest praise and were criticized by some critics as too starkly realistic and grim. In 1907 he tried his hand at lighter comedy; *Lady Frederick*, about a woman’s attempts to discourage a persistent young suitor, was an immediate hit and enjoyed an extended run on London’s West End and then Broadway, commencing a lengthy parade of Maugham’s theatrical successes. *Lady Frederick* also introduced the first in a series of strong, articulate, and surprisingly (for their era) feminist female characters whose personal and sexual ambitions Maugham would put center stage in a string of popular plays, culminating in one of his most clever and captivating creations, Constance Middleton—“The Constant Wife.”
An aggrieved Shakespeare surrounded by evidence of Maugham’s prodigious success as a playwright, by Bernard Partridge (Punch magazine, c. 1912). © Punch, Ltd.
Maugham had found his own distinct theatrical voice, and a penchant for wicked observation of society’s scandals, which the public cheered. He didn’t return to writing novels or short fiction for more than ten years, instead devoting himself to “that little thrill of amusement” he felt every time he heard actors say the lines he had written. Fans of his plays raved that Maugham’s popularity was second only to Shakespeare—a fact demonstrated in 1908 and ’09 when he had four first-run plays on the boards simultaneously in London (setting a West End record), while another two revivals played in New York. In the 1930s Maugham ranked as the highest paid author in the world.

His overwhelming success was due in part to having found a subject that the very well-mannered audiences he skewered in his plays couldn’t seem to get enough of: marriage. Maugham trained his satirical sights on the marital mores and mishaps of upper-class British society, exploring with an unblinking eye just how far the reality of marriage often strays from the conventional ideal of conjugal bliss. His writing probed such taboo subjects as sexual duplicity and the double standards applied to men and women’s romantic behavior: The Letter (1927) tells the story of a woman who claims self-defense for the murder of her lover; The Circle (1921), one of Maugham’s most celebrated and oft-produced comedies, deals with the dilemma of a young woman intent on leaving her pompous husband; Our Betters (1917)—which was delayed from opening in London by fear of lawsuits—exposes the shallowness and hypocrisy of the English idle rich whose funding is supplied by the American heiresses who have bought their way into their ranks.

A MODERN LOOK AT MARRIAGE

The Constant Wife, written in 1926 (the year his own marriage to society decorator Syrie Wellcome was disintegrating), is Maugham’s exploration of the limitations of the marriage contract—namely, whether marriage as we know it amounts to more than an economic arrangement, and what a man or woman is to do when the lover they married becomes the spouse they no longer desire.

Constance keeps the audience guessing throughout the play about just how much she knows, and what she’ll do, about her husband’s alleged affair with her best friend, Marie-Louise. “This was surely the moment when English drama definitively broke with its prurient Victorian past,” wrote London critic Benedict Nightingale last year when The Constant Wife was revived at London’s Lyric Theatre. “When Maugham wrote the play, Coward was in his theatrical infancy. Shaw had suggested that orthodox marriage was a fraud, but then Shaw was a maverick who wrote plays for socialists, bluestockings, and cads. But here was a mainstream dramatist not merely justifying adultery, but doing it through a woman’s mouth and for a woman’s benefit.”
A FASCINATING CHARACTER

“When I first read *The Constant Wife*, I was immediately struck by the script’s freshness,” says Kyle Donnelly, looking forward to making her much-anticipated A.C.T. directorial debut. “It has Maugham’s trademark wit, but also a freshness that still has the power to surprise. Let’s not give away what happens, but the play has great twists that I thought were wonderful, as well as intelligent, extremely funny characters.” A widely renowned director, Donnelly has helmed productions of both classics and contemporary work at many of this country’s leading regional theaters, including the world premiere of John Strand’s *Tom Walker*, and his adaptation of Molière’s *The Miser*, at Arena Stage (where she served as associate artistic director for six years); Brian Friel’s *Give Me Your Answer, Do!* for the Roundabout Theatre Company in New York; and productions at the Steppenwolf Theatre Company, Huntington Theatre Company, Williamstown Theatre Festival, and Goodman Theatre. Donnelly is currently the head of the acting program of the theater department at UC San Diego.

Donnelly is intrigued by Maugham’s portrayal of a woman who speaks her mind openly and with articulate passion and a clever wit. “Constance is a fascinating character whose resourcefulness and strength are as remarkable today as when the play was written,” says Donnelly, who will reunite with Ellen Karras—whom she has directed previously in *Blithe Spirit* at Arena Stage and *The Rover* at the Goodman Theatre—who plays the title role in A.C.T.’s *The Constant Wife* and also makes her Geary Theater debut with this production.

“Constance is extraordinarily savvy,” says Donnelly, “and uses her patience very wisely. Unlike the classic ‘woman scorned,’ she doesn’t let herself jump to a hasty reaction. She assesses the volatile situation in which she finds herself in a very calm way, before she chooses to make a move—which wouldn’t necessarily be the expected or ‘normal’ thing to do. She becomes more of her own woman that way.

“The great fun for the audience will be experiencing the mystery of how she’ll react—What is going to happen between Constance and [her surgeon husband] John? What will he do? What will she do? These plot twists combine with the social and comical aspects of the play in a delightful way. I do believe this play is political, but the politics and the comedy are equally important. Our challenge is to make sure neither one outweighs the other.”

STILL STUNNING

While Maugham’s play surely shocked its original audiences with its frank deconstruction of the marriage ideal, does a woman striving for her own liberty still have the power to stun? “I think it must have been much more shocking then,” says Donnelly, “but I do
believe the play’s two animating ideas still have great power—that, for women at least, sexual freedom and economic autonomy are inextricably linked, and that society applies double standards to male and female infidelity.

“Obviously, we are living in a very different world today, but I think watching the play now will reveal how little society has actually changed. We are a country that places a high value on marriage—despite the fact that statistically it’s on shakier ground than ever before—and we are still talking about ‘family values.’ I don’t think we’re as open-minded as we like to think we are.”

Maugham was dubbed a cynic by many in his lifetime for his withering views on love, yet Donnelly agrees with those who continue to find in Maugham’s shrewd depth of awareness a kind of hyperrealism. “I don’t find *The Constant Wife* cynical at all,” continues Donnelly. “In fact, I find it disarmingly honest. Sexual independence for women has always been viewed differently than it has for men. Always.

“I think when we rely too heavily on societal norms, there will always be the desire to buck those norms, especially when there are double standards involved. One of the things the play explores with great insight is that there is tradition, and then there is the reality of human behavior—and every relationship has to find its way through those two.”
A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

BY HANNAH KNAPP

William Somerset Maugham (1874–1965) was born in Paris on January 25, 1874. His father was an advisor to the British embassy, his mother a beautiful, cultivated woman 20 years younger than his father. Maugham and his five elder brothers spent their youth among statesmen, artists, and writers, until their mother’s death from tuberculosis in 1882, followed by their father’s death from cancer two years later, left them orphans.

Maugham was raised from the age of ten by a clergyman uncle in England and was educated at King’s School in Canterbury. Because of his small stature and the aftereffects of a bout with tuberculosis suffered at the age of 15, Maugham was unable to play sports. He was further divided from other schoolboys by the development of a painful stammer that would last the rest of his life. Maugham grew up taciturn and introspective.

To escape King’s School, Maugham convinced his uncle to let him live and study for one year in Heidelberg, Germany. There, although he was not registered as a student, he enjoyed lectures on philosophy, poetry, religion, and art. It was in Heidelberg that Maugham, at 16 years old, saw his first Ibsen play and began to imitate that playwright’s style in his own writing. There he also discovered his homosexuality, a preference to which he would keep returning throughout his life, despite later sexual experiences with women, including several affairs, marriage, and fatherhood. When Maugham left Heidelberg in 1892, England had just passed a law making homosexuality a crime, which, together with social pressure, led Maugham to conceal his sexual preference.

After returning to London, Maugham studied for five years at St. Thomas’s Hospital medical school, where he qualified as a physician and surgeon in 1897. A yearlong internship in the Lambeth slums, together with the accumulated experiences of his medical education, gave Maugham the inspiration for his first novel, Liza of Lambeth (1897), which was enough of a success to convince him to abandon the medical profession and devote himself to writing—the career he had always wanted to pursue. His early experience in medicine gave him the tools for acute observation of human beings and contributed to the development of an unflinchingly realistic approach to himself and the world, both of which would influence Maugham’s work throughout his career.

The early success of Liza of Lambeth opened the doors of literary salons in London, an environment much closer to that of Maugham’s Parisian childhood than anything he had experienced since. He had always seen publishing a novel as a first step towards having one of his plays produced, but it would take ten years and several more novels and short
stories before Maugham could convince a manager to put his work on the stage. When his socially critical early dramas met with lackluster response, Maugham turned to light drawing-room plays, in the style of the English comedy of manners. *Lady Frederick* was produced in 1907 with enough success that Maugham’s work was continuously produced for almost two decades; he saw 29 of his plays mounted before officially retiring from playwriting after the failure of *Sheppey* in 1933. His early success was dramatic: in 1908, Maugham had four plays running at once on the Strand in London, and his financial woes were over.

During his early, successful years as a playwright, Maugham met and became the lover of Sue Jones, the daughter of Henry Arthur Jones, a popular dramatist of the time. An affair that he thought would last six weeks lasted eight years before he proposed marriage—and was rejected. Maugham immediately began seeing Syrie Wellcome, the unhappily married daughter of philanthropist Dr. Thomas Barnado. In 1915, Wellcome bore Maugham a daughter, Elizabeth, and two years later, after a messy divorce from Wellcome’s husband, they married. Maugham welcomed the attachment as a cover for his homosexual activities, but the marriage was unhappy, and Syrie divorced him in 1929.

At the beginning of World War I, Maugham joined the Red Cross Ambulance Unit in France, where he met one of the great loves of his life, Gerald Haxton, who would remain Maugham’s personal secretary and partner for much of his life. Before long, the British Intelligence Department sent Maugham to work as a secret agent in Geneva and then in St. Petersburg, where he was part of a special mission to prevent the outbreak of the Bolshevik revolution. At the same time, Maugham was hard at work on the autobiographical novel that would truly make his name. *Of Human Bondage* was published to wild acclaim in 1915 and remains one of his finest, and most popular, works.

Toward the end of the war, Maugham made his first pilgrimage to the South Seas. He returned there and to the Far East after the war was over, gathering material for books and plays. What he saw and experienced on his travels influenced the middle of his career, during which he wrote plays and short stories often set in exotic, cosmopolitan locales. In 1928, Maugham, tired of traveling, bought a villa at Cape Ferrat on the French Riviera, where he would live out the rest of his life between frequent journeys.

The period between 1915 and 1930 was Maugham’s most prolific. The plays he wrote during the 1920s—*The Circle* (written in 1919, produced in 1921), *The Constant Wife* (1926), and *The Letter* (1927)—were well received. He also wrote many short stories and the novel *Cakes and Ale* (1930), in which he turned his former lover Sue Jones into the unforgettable character of Rosie.
During the 1930s, Maugham moved away from playwriting to author several novels and volumes of short stories, as well as *The Summing Up* (1938), an autobiographical sketch. Maugham's reputation was very strong, as the most prolific and highest-paid British writer of his era. At the same time, however, critics often found his writing weak, despite its recognized craftsmanship. Maugham himself expressed anxiety over his questionable position in English literature. He was not necessarily the most respected author of his time, however well known he may have been.

After the outbreak of World War II, Maugham again operated as a secret agent for the British Intelligence Department, this time serving in France, based at his villa on the Riviera. After escaping the approaching German army in 1940, Maugham went to the United States, where he lived for six years in a small cottage on the plantation of Nelson Doubleday (of Doubleday Books) in South Carolina. He spent some time each fall and spring at the Ritz Carlton in New York City and summers on Martha's Vineyard, lecturing in between at universities and, always, writing. Maugham ran with a sophisticated international set, both in the United States and, after the war, back in southern France. During his time in the United States, he wrote more short stories and novels, the most widely read being *The Razor's Edge* (1944), which was quickly made into a movie, as were many of his works in his later years.

After his return to France in 1946, Maugham truly became a celebrity, living the life of a “grand old man” of literature, still writing every morning and entertaining such celebrity friends as Winston Churchill, Grace Kelly, Adlai Stevenson, and Ian Fleming (who said that he based the adventures of James Bond in part on tales of Maugham's wartime escapades) at his villa in the afternoons and evenings. Maugham continued to travel—and write prolifically—throughout the rest of his life, despite depression and eventual derangement caused by outliving his contemporaries. He died in his villa just a month before his 92nd birthday, on December 16, 1965.

Maugham's prose style has been described as clean, lucid, and unadorned. All of his works have an urbane polish and sophisticated wit, and many of them have cosmopolitan settings. Maugham was an expert at writing the “well-made play,” a structure that gives the audience the satisfaction of a clear beginning, middle, and end and lends itself to the clarity and irony that Maugham sought to convey in all his writing. His critical eye for human nature led one literary critic (Robert Warnock) to observe:

Maugham's refreshing urbanity makes him able to take a thoroughly unsentimental view of people and institutions without wishing in the least to destroy them. He is rational but not inhuman, cynical but not despairing,
dispassionate but far from frigid. As he has grown older, many have recognized
in him a wise man among us, who shows in his serious books how to live hap-
pily without illusions, beyond convention but not in conflict with it. We may
admit that society would fall to pieces if his outlook were universally adopted.
But there is no danger that it will be, for Maugham is by nature a man apart
who would influence only the few who can live in comfortable detachment
from the mores of ordinary people.
A BRIEF PRODUCTION HISTORY OF THE CONSTANT WIFE
BY HANNAH KNAPP

The Constant Wife has enjoyed several substantial runs, in London and New York, since its premiere in 1926.

Ethel Barrymore originated the role of Constance Middleton, opening the 1926 pre-Broadway run in Cleveland with what is remembered as perhaps one of the worst performances of her career. Barrymore mixed up her lines and even dropped a few completely throughout all three acts—despite prompting from the director, hidden in the onstage fireplace, and cue sheets scattered across the stage—maddening her fellow actors. Afterwards, she went up to W. Somerset Maugham, who had traveled from England for the Cleveland opening, and, magnificently contrite, cried, “O, Willie! I have ruined your play! But it will run a year!”

And so it did. The production in fact ran for 295 performances on Broadway, followed by a year on tour. Critics hailed Barrymore’s performance as “pure gold,” calling The Constant Wife “a deft and sparkling comedy of no overwhelming importance . . . written with wit and sprightliness—Mr. Maugham just about at his best . . . the best play of its kind that has come from England in a long time.” Barrymore successfully reprised the role in 1935 at the New Rochelle Playhouse just outside New York.

The play did not fare so well in London, however. The reception of the 1927 production, with Fay Compton as Constance, was cool. The London opening, too, was damned from the start, this time through no fault of the actors. The last row of stalls had been oversold, and the theater manager had to ask audience members to give up their seats; only the playing of the British national anthem soothed the tempers of disappointed theatergoers. Both American and British critics found the production lacking in humanity: “[T]he characters are no more than clever, argumentative, and rather morbid puppets, and their language—a strange thing in the work of Somerset Maugham—sounds stiff, formal, elaborately contrived”; “If there had been any emotion whatever in the play, someone might have had the pleasure of being shocked, but it is hard even to be shocked by a bowl of goldfish swimming, coldly but in an elaborate pattern, after one another’s decorative tails.”

More than two decades later, in 1952, Katharine Cornell revived The Constant Wife on Broadway, with herself in the title role. A popular Broadway veteran, Cornell was warmly received by the opening night audience, which “felt very happy about everything and was elated to be in Miss Cornell’s company again.” Brooks Atkinson of the New York Times was not impressed, however: “Her constant wife in an inconstant world is overwhelmed with
warmth and feeling and by being frank and sincere.” He had stronger praise for Maugham’s perfection of the comedic form, describing the play as “impious and witty” and finding “the literary style . . . urbane and the wit . . . barked, adroit, and professionally insincere.” The production ran for 138 performances.

The next significant revival was by Ingrid Bergman in the 1970s. Increasingly relegated to “character parts” in Hollywood as she gracefully advanced in years, Bergman had begun to turn to the stage for satisfying roles. In The Constant Wife, she found just such a role, as well as a play that pleased audiences. She told an interviewer at the time, “The Constant Wife may be old-fashioned in its structure, but the story is fundamentally true; the ideas are just as modern today as they were in 1926. And people recognize the jokes like old friends; the laughter is deafening.” Directed by Sir John Gielgud, the production opened first in London, where one critic called the play “A Doll’s House reworked as a farcical light comedy.” Although Bergman was faulted for not letting the witty lines flow as easily as did some of her fellow actors, critics found her “tender recollection of the five years’ love . . . touchingly done.” The production did very well, moving on to tour the United States and enjoy a short run on Broadway in 1975.

Following a brief stint at the Westport Country Playhouse (directed by Joanne Woodward) in the summer of 2000, The Constant Wife received its most significant revival in London last year. Running from April through November 2002, the production featured British television star Jenny Seagrove as Constance. Critics remarked on the play’s prescient feminism and hailed Maugham as “a skilled craftsman who knew how to play with the conventions of drawing-room drama.”

The fact that The Constant Wife, at 77 years old, can still delight audiences and challenge actors is proof enough of Maugham’s endurance as a playwright.

Somerset Maugham is an oddly underrated dramatist: he had something of Coward’s iron technique and epigrammatic wit but a far more interesting mind. And Edward Hall’s elegant revival of Maugham’s acidulous 1926 comedy reminds us that just because plays are set in expensive drawing rooms does not mean they are devoid of content.

Two particular ideas animate the action: that you cannot have sexual liberty without economic freedom and that society operates double standards over male and female infidelity. To that end Maugham shows the resourceful Constance Middleton publicly acknowledging what she has long privately known: that her surgeon husband has been having an affair with her best friend, Marie-Louise.
But her revenge is twofold: by taking a job as an interior decorator she is able to gain her economic independence and by going off to Italy with a devoted admirer she exposes the hypocrisy that adultery is a male prerogative.

You could argue that no one today would challenge Maugham’s arguments. But what he still manages to convey is the shock value of Constance’s independence in its social context. Her husband is a pompous prig, her mother an apologist for male deception, and her sister a vindictive voyeur.

Thus, when Constance calmly defines a modern wife as “a prostitute who doesn’t deliver the goods” it comes as a resounding slap in the face. And, when her husband beseechingly asks if he cannot also be her lover, her announcement that “no one can make yesterday’s cold mutton into tomorrow’s lamb cutlets” packs an emotional punch.

Maugham is always dubbed a cynic. He strikes me instead as a realist who understands that society is a house of cards sustained by hypocrisy and capable of being toppled by sincerity and logic. But Maugham was also a skilled craftsman who knew how to play with the conventions of drawing room drama.

—Michael Billington, reviewing last year’s London production of The Constant Wife in The Guardian (April 12, 2002)
MAUGHAM ON THEATER

In the following passage from his autobiography, The Summing Up (1938), W. Somerset Maugham describes his feelings about working in the theater.

I was never stage struck. I have known dramatists who wandered in every night to the theatre in which their play was being acted. They said they did it in order to see that the cast was not getting slack; I suspect it was because they could never hear their own words spoken enough. Their delight was to sit in a dressing room during the intervals and talk over this scene or the other, wondering why it had fallen flat that night or congratulating themselves on how well it had gone, and watch an actor make up. They never ceased to find the theatrical gossip of the day absorbing. They loved the theatre and everything connected with it. They had greasepaint in their bones.

I have never been like that. I like a theatre best when it is under dust-sheets, the auditorium in darkness, and the unset stage, with the flats stacked against the back wall, is lit only by footlights. I have passed many happy hours at rehearsals; I have liked their easy camaraderie, the hurried lunch at a restaurant around the corner with a member of the cast and the cup of strong bitter tea, with thick bread and butter, brought in by the charwoman at four o’clock. I have never quite lost that little thrill of surprised amusement I felt when in my first play I heard grown men and women repeat the lines that had come so easily to my pen. It has interested me to watch the way in which a part grows in the actor’s hands from the first lifeless reading of the typescript to something like the character that I have seen in my mind’s eye. I have been diverted by the important discussions about the exact place where a piece of furniture should stand, the self-sufficiency of a director, the tantrums of an actress displeased with her positions, the artfulness of old players determined to get the centre of the stage for their scene, and the desultory talk about any subject that came to hand. But the consummation is the dress rehearsal. There are half a dozen people in the front row of the dress circle. They are the dressmakers, subdued as though they were in church, but very businesslike; they exchange short, sharp whispers with one another during the performance and make little significant gestures. You know that they are speaking of the length of a skirt, the cut of a sleeve, or the feather in a hat; and the moment the curtain falls, the pins already in their mouths, they hurry through the door on to the stage. The director shouts “curtain up” and when it rises an actress snatches herself away from an agitated colloquy with two grim ladies in black.
In the stalls are the photographers, the management, and the man from the box office, the mothers of the actresses in the cast and the wives of the actors, your own agent, a girlfriend of yours, and three or four old actors who haven’t had a part for 20 years. It is the perfect audience. After each act the director reads out the remarks he has jotted down. There is a row with the electrician, who, with nothing to do but attend to his switches, has turned on the wrong ones; and the author is indignant with him for being so careless and at the same time indulgent because he has a notion that the electrician only forgot his work because he was so absorbed in the play. Perhaps a little scene is repeated; then the effective positions are arranged and with sudden blares of flash-light photographs are taken. The curtain is lowered to set the scene for the next act and the cast separate to their dressing rooms to change. The dressmakers vanish and the old actors slink round the corner to have a drink. The management despondently smoke gaspers, the wives and mothers of the cast talk to one another in undertones, and the author’s agent reads the racing news in the evening paper. It is all unreal and exciting. At last the dressmakers filter through the fireproof door and resume their seats, the representatives of rival firms at a haughty distance from one another, and the stage-manager puts his head round the curtain.

“All ready, Mr. Thing,” he says.

“All right. Fire away. Curtain up.”

When W. Somerset Maugham’s play The Circle premiered in 1921, critic Desmond MacCarthy hailed it as “a decided step forward on the road towards the creation of [Maugham’s] genuine cynical masterpiece.” Over the years, the term “cynical” surfaced repeatedly as a means of describing Maugham’s response to the world around him. According to MacCarthy, “In the aquarium of life, he sees aristocratic sharks, humble greedy pike, gorgeous octopuses, fair drifting jelly-fish, and occasionally he notices a flat, good-natured sole at the bottom of the tank who is content to lie modestly in the sand.”

The following passage by Maugham from The Summing Up discusses his own views on cynicism and human nature.

I have been called cynical. I have been accused of making men out worse than they are. I do not think I have done this. All I have done is to bring into prominence certain traits that many writers shut their eyes to. I think what has chiefly struck me in human beings is their lack of consistency. I have never seen people all of a piece. It has amazed me that the most incongruous traits should exist in the same person and for all that yield a plausible harmony. I have often asked myself how characteristics, seemingly irreconcilable, can exist in the same person. I have known crooks who were capable of self-sacrifice, sneak thieves who were sweet-natured and harlots for whom it was a point of honour to give good value for money. The only explanation I can offer is that so instinctive is each one’s conviction that he is unique in the world, and privileged, that he feels that, however wrong it might be for others, what he for his part does, if not natural and right, is at last venial. The contrast that I have found in people has interested me, but I do not think I have unduly emphasized it. The censure that has from time to time been passed on me is due perhaps to the fact that I have not expressly condemned what is bad in the characters of my invention and praised what was good. It must be a fault in me that I am not gravely shocked at the sins of others unless they personally affect me, and even when they do I have learnt at last generally to excuse them. It is meet not to expect too much of others. You should be grateful when they treat you well, but unperturbed when they treat you ill. “For every one of us,” as the Athenian Stranger said, “is made pretty much what he is by the bent of his desires and the nature of his soul.” It is want of imagination that prevents people from seeing things from any point of view but their own, and it is unreasonable to be angry with them because they lack this faculty.
I think I could be justly blamed if I saw only people’s faults and were blind to their virtues. I am not conscious that this is the case. There is nothing more beautiful than goodness, and it has pleased me very often to show how much of it there is in persons who by common standards would be relentlessly condemned. I have shown it because I have seen it. It has seemed to me sometimes to shine more brightly in them because it was surrounded by the darkness of sin. I take the goodness of the good for granted, and I am amused to discover their defects or vices; I am touched when I see the goodness of the wicked, and I am willing enough to shrug a tolerant shoulder at their wickedness. I am not my brother’s keeper. I cannot bring myself to judge my fellows; I am content to observe them. My observation has led me to the belief that, all in all, there is not so much difference between the good and the bad as the moralists would have us believe.

THE CONSTANT WIFE IN CONTEXT
A Timeline (1920–29)

BY PAUL WALSH

1920
The 18th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution goes into effect, marking the beginning of Prohibition. Seven months later the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, called the “Susan B. Anthony Amendment,” gives American women the vote.

The League of Nations is established by the Versailles Treaty and holds its first meeting in London, where it confirms a British mandate over Palestine.

Mohandas K. Gandhi becomes the leader of the Indian National Congress and leads a nonviolent disobedience protest against British rule.

English dockworkers refuse to load armaments for use by the Allies against Russian revolutionaries. Eventually the White Russians are defeated in the Russian civil war.

Britain declares martial law in Ireland as the War of Irish Independence forces Britain to recognize the Irish Free State.

H. G. Wells publishes The Outline of History. Agatha Christie writes the first of her Hercule Poirot detective novels. Hugh Lofting’s charming Dr. Doolittle talks to the animals. Edith Wharton’s The Age of Innocence skewers callous New York society. Sinclair Lewis ridicules middle-class America in Main Street. Eugene O’Neill’s play The Emperor Jones premieres, telling the tale of a black antihero.

The domestic refrigerator begins to replace the icebox.

KDKA begins broadcasting on a regular schedule from a makeshift shack atop a Westinghouse manufacturing building in East Pittsburgh, launching the era of radio. In England, Marconi creates the first shortwave radio connection.

The submachine gun is invented.

1921
The Ku Klux Klan begins to rise in the southern United States.

The New York American reports that there is a “bill pending in Utah providing fine and imprisonment for those who wear on the streets ‘skirts higher than three inches above the ankle.’ Virginia legislatures debate a bill forbidding a woman from wearing shirtwaists or evening gowns showing “more than 3 inches of her throat.” In Ohio a similar bill is pending, but with a 2-inch limit; the Ohio bill also restricts the sale of any “garment which
unduly displays or accentuates the lines of the female figure” and prohibits any “female over 14 years of age” from wearing “a skirt which does not reach to that part of the foot known as the instep.” By July hems have risen to nine inches above the ground.

Sun Yat-sen is elected President of China, leading to civil war and the founding of the Chinese Communist Party, which holds its first Congress in Shanghai.

Great Britain gives the “Irish Free State” dominion status under the Anglo-Irish Treaty, leading to civil war in Ireland for the next year.

Dr. Marie Stopes opens the first family-planning clinic in London.

Adolf Hitler is elected president of the National Socialist German Workers (Nazi) Party. Benito Mussolini declares himself leader of the National Fascist Party in Italy.

Western Union begins a wire photo service. By the end of the year, photographs are transmitted by wire across the Atlantic.

Italian playwright Luigi Pirandello premieres Six Characters in Search of an Author. Eugene O’Neill’s play Anna Christie opens; it will win the Pulitzer Prize for drama. The Cleveland Play House becomes the first resident professional theater in the United States.

D. H. Lawrence’s Women in Love examines sexual, psychological relationships. At the movies: Chaplin’s The Kid and Valentino’s The Sheik are popular hits. Arnold Schoenberg develops 12-tone music notation. Sergei Prokofiev’s opera The Love for Three Oranges is performed.

Designer Gabrielle “Coco” Chanel introduces her first perfume, Chanel No. 5, which becomes the world’s best-selling perfume.

The Miss America Contest is established in Atlantic City, with the purpose of extending the tourist season beyond Labor Day. Sixteen-year-old Margaret Gorman is named the first Miss America.

1922
The tomb of the Egyptian King Tutankhamun is discovered. After the death of one of the discoverers, rumors of a curse on the tomb circulate through the press.

Mussolini calls for fascist “Blackshirts” to March on Rome and is appointed premier by King Victor Emmanuel III.

As unemployment grows in depressed areas of northern Britain, trade unionists and Socialists in Glasgow organize the first hunger march to London.

Hyperinflation devastates the German economy. Wages are paid as frequently as twice a day to give people a chance to spend currency before it loses value. Other countries agree to ease the burden of post–World War I reparations.

The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (ussr) is established.
Mrs. Rebecca Fenton becomes the first woman appointed to the U.S. Senate.
Mah Jong becomes all the rage.

The British Broadcasting Company (BBC) is established. The first radio commercial is broadcast in the United States.


1923

In Britain, women are allowed to obtain divorce on the same grounds as men, including adultery.

An electric razor is patented by Schick.

The French military occupies the Ruhr area after Germany fails to pay war damages due under the Versailles Treaty. Hitler’s Munich Beer Hall Putsch fails to inspire an anti-Soviet revolution in Germany, although it is hailed in the West as the first blow against “Communist oppression.” The exchange rate for the German mark tops thirty million to the pound, and the German economy shows sign of collapse.

Mount Etna erupts.

Maud Howe Elliott and Laura Howe Richards are the first women to win the Pulitzer Prize for biography. They share the award for their profile of their mother, Julia Ward Howe. Poet Edna St. Vincent Millay becomes the first woman to receive the Pulitzer Prize for poetry, for “The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver.” Novelist Willa Cather also wins.

Scandal-plagued President Warren G. Harding dies of a “stroke of apoplexy” (probably an embolism) in a San Francisco hotel room. He is succeeded by Calvin Coolidge.

It is reported that an average person goes to the movies a little more than once a week. Neon signs are introduced.

Edward Bernays’s *Crystallizing Public Opinion* introduces the notion of public relations and becomes the first PR manual. Sigmund Freud publishes *The Ego and the Id*. George Bernard Shaw’s *St. Joan* argues that she had to die; the world was not ready for her. *Time*, the weekly newsmagazine, is available on newsstands.
Half a million radios are sold in United States, a five-fold increase in one year. A. C. Nielsen Company begins to measure radio audiences for advertisers. Kodak introduces home movie equipment.

1924

Crossword puzzle books are all the rage.

KKK membership reaches 4.5 million in the United States.

Lenin dies; Stalin wins the resulting power struggle.

J. Edgar Hoover becomes head of the Bureau of Investigation (changed to Federal Bureau of Investigation in 1935).

The British Labour Party, led by Ramsey MacDonald, comes to power for the first time (remaining for just nine months).

A speech by King George V is broadcast over the BBC.

Notebooks get spiral bindings.

E. M. Forster publishes A Passage to India. Herman Melville’s 1891 Billy Budd is finally published. Eugene O’Neill continues to dominate American dramatic writing with Desire under the Elms. Sean O’Casey writes Juno and the Paycock. Thomas Mann publishes The Magic Mountain.

1925

The town of Norphelt, Arkansas, adopts a law criminalizing premarital sex. In Dayton, Tennessee, a schoolteacher named John Scopes is arrested for teaching the theory of evolution. His trial attracts worldwide attention with William Jennings Bryan arguing for the prosecution and Clarence Darrow, Dudley Field Malone, and Arthur Garfield Hays from the Civil Liberties Union for the defense. Scopes is convicted and pays a $100 fine, which he eventually gets back on appeal.

Nellie Taylor Ross of Wyoming becomes the first female governor in the United States; Miriam “Ma” Ferguson of Texas is the second.

The SS (Schutzstaffel) is formed in Germany. Mussolini dismisses the Italian parliament and begins to assume dictatorial powers.

Unemployment in Britain tops one million for the first time.

Caviar is introduced to France at the Universal Exhibition.

Edwin Hubble discovers the first galaxy outside the Milky Way (Andromeda), two million light years away from Earth.

Alban Berg’s Wozzeck removes tonality from opera. Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby are published. Shaw wins the Nobel Prize in literature.
Adolf Hitler is released from Landsberg prison after serving less than nine months of a five-year sentence and publishes the first volume of Mein Kampf, written in prison.

Harold Ross founds The New Yorker.

A British radio broadcast is heard in the United States for the first time.

The first televised image is introduced in London. The first image: $.

1926

The overvaluation of the British pound, and an attempt to reduce prices and wages to improve competition overseas, provoke a general strike that paralyzes Britain for nine days.

Germany joins the League of Nations and Spain resigns its membership.

The National Broadcasting Company (NBC) is founded in New York.

Kodak manufactures 16mm film stock and the first 16mm film is shot.

A. A. Milne introduces Christopher Robin, Winnie the Pooh, and Piglet to the world.


Robert Goddard launches a liquid-fuel rocket.

Hysteria and suicides following the death of Rudolf Valentino at age 31 demonstrate the emotional power of film.

Giacomo Puccini’s Turandot is produced posthumously. Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart bring The Girl Friend to Broadway. Edna Ferber’s novel Show Boat will become a Broadway musical and hit film. A barefoot Martha Graham leads the American modern dance movement.

Bell Telephone Labs transmit film by television.

1927

Forty-one deaths in New York’s Bellevue Hospital on New Year’s Day are attributed to “bad booze.” There have been 50,000 alcohol-related deaths since Prohibition, as well as hundreds of thousands of nonfatal blindness and paralysis cases. At the same time, the estimated number of speakeasies in New York City has risen (from 5,000 in 1922) to 30,000. Al Capone’s gang is estimated to reap $60,000,000 from illegal beer and liquor sales. Newspaper polls begin to report that a majority of voters favor repeal of the 18th Amendment.
British women, having been given some voting rights during World War I, gain the same voting rights as men.

Charles Lindbergh leaves from Curtiss Field, Long Island, for Paris in the first Atlantic air crossing.

Werner Heisenberg proposes the “uncertainty principle” (we cannot simultaneously determine the position and momentum of a subatomic particle).

The Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) is founded. Radio broadcasting has become a “mass medium.”

Martin Heidegger’s Being and Time helps found modern existentialism.

The first television pictures are successfully transmitted in San Francisco by Philo Farnsworth, and the first talking motion picture, The Jazz Singer, is produced in Hollywood. Movietone begins offering newsreels in sound and The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences is founded.

Herman Hesse’s novel Steppenwolf, a fable about the split in human nature, is published. Thornton Wilder’s The Bridge of San Luis Rey wins the Pulitzer Prize. In Paris, Marcel Proust completes his 16-volume Remembrance of Things Past. Sinclair Lewis attacks religious hypocrisy in Elmer Gantry.

Transatlantic telephone service is established between New York and London, but the costs are extravagant: a five-minute call from the United States to London costs $75.

1928

An estimated one in six marriages in the United States ends in divorce. The age of suffrage is lowered from 30 to 21 in Great Britain. Women compete for the first time in Olympic field events.

Herbert Hoover defeats Al Smith in the U.S. presidential election. In June stock prices on the New York exchange plummet but quickly recover. They do the same in December.

Scottish biologist Alexander Fleming discovers penicillin, the first antibiotic.

Amelia Earhart becomes the first female aviator to cross the Atlantic. Lady Heath—equipped with a Bible, a shotgun, tennis rackets, six tea gowns, and a fur coat—makes the first solo flight from the Cape of Good Hope to Cairo.

The first television sets are introduced to consumers, at $75 each.

Richard Byrd successfully reaches the South Pole by plane.

The teletype machine makes its debut.

The first Academy Awards are bestowed (on Wings, Emil Jannings, and Janet Gaynor). The first all-dialogue feature film, The Lights of New York, is released by Warner Brothers, and the first talking cartoon, Disney’s Steamboat Willie, introduces Mickey Mouse.

Decline and Fall, Evelyn Waugh’s first satiric novel about the British upper crust, is published. D. H. Lawrence’s Lady Chatterley’s Lover will be banned for years because of its sexual content.

The Charleston is the newest dance craze. The Oxford English Dictionary, begun in 1858, is completed at 15,487 pages. Syndication of recorded radio programs begins in the U.S. with “Amos and Andy,” which broadcasts to huge audiences. IBM adopts the 80-column punched card.

1929

Construction begins on the Empire State Building.

Second Labour ministry under Ramsey MacDonald in Britain.

In Chicago, seven gangsters are lined up against a garage wall and executed by a rival gang. The event is known henceforth as the “St. Valentine’s Day Massacre.”

Erich Maria Remarque’s pacifist novel All Quiet on the Western Front is published. Sinclair Lewis’s novel Dodsworth explores the pain of adultery. Thomas Mann is awarded the Nobel Prize in literature. William Faulkner’s novel The Sound and the Fury is published; Hemingway’s A Farewell to Arms extends his reputation.

In London, the first television station is built (for experimental transmission only). Ship passengers can phone relatives ashore.

Bertrand Russell challenges tradition with Marriage and Morals.

Collapse of the New York stock market leads to the Great Depression and world economic crisis. By November 13, stocks have reached their lowest levels. Industrial averages have fallen from 469.49 to 220.95. Brokers watch stock prices soar and crash on an automated electric board.
The appearance and behavior of women in Britain and the United States changed radically after World War I. No longer was a girl, demure and plump, expected to wait passively for her future to find her in the shape of some respectable young man. The “new” woman was spirited, slim, and aggressive in her pursuit of whatever it was she happened to want at the moment, be it a man, a drink, or a cigarette. As the younger generation exploded the social mores of the Edwardian era, their elders looked on in astonishment, wondering how any of them could possibly come to good ends. Fashions came and went, but many of the changes that took place during the 1920s turned out to be enduring, particularly when it came to women’s rights over their own bodies.

The disintegration of “Society,” which had been proceeding ever since the Edwardian days, was noticeably speeded up. The chic replaced the *comme il faut*; the “gorgeous fringes” spread over the entire warp and woof. For the first time we hear the gigolo spoken of, perhaps with a shrug, but without any simulated horror. The divorcée and the woman with no visible means of support are alike accepted. The catchword is “amusing,” and if that hurdle can be taken—anything goes.

—James Laver, *Between the Wars* (1961)

Supposedly “nice” girls were smoking cigarettes—openly and defiantly, if often rather awkwardly and self-consciously. They were drinking—somewhat less openly but often all too efficaciously. There were stories of daughters of the most exemplary parents getting drunk—“blotto,” as their companions cheerfully put it . . . and going out joyriding with men at four in the morning.

—Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday* (1931)

The new woman did not represent as much of a menace to her male contemporaries as she did to the framework of morals prized by the entire older generation. In the eyes of young men of the time, girls were veering towards masculinity but in a pleasing way. By acting like “one of the boys,” the “flapper” of the twenties made real boys feel more comfortable in her presence. Slender, saucy, and smartly insolent, the boyish girl of this era considered it proper to pursue the young man of her choice. Candid, confident, trim, and gay, this New Woman really knew what she wanted and set about unabashedly to get it.

It was not of course that the twenties were really more “immoral” than the epochs that had gone before. It was only that things had got a little bit more mixed up. The Edwardian man of the world kept his life in watertight compartments and was even pedantically careful that his wife and his mistress should never meet. In the twenties all the barriers were down. There were no more grandes cocottes: a general promiscuity had deprived them of their status and even their livelihood. In the worlds of a Cole Porter lyric in “Nymph Errant”:

In the days of more strict propriety
Women like me were covered with glory;
But now, since these damned Society women
Invaded my territory . . .
A busted, disgusted cocotte am I,
On the page of this age just a blot am I,
For since the girls called chic
Have invented new technique,
I'm afraid, at my trade, not so hot am I.

. . . Few young women of the period had any inhibitions. Indeed, since everybody had now read Freud, and interpreted, more or less correctly, his gospel, inhibitions were definitely (“definitely” was the most overworked word of the epoch) out of fashion.

—*Between the Wars*

[In the early 20th century,] the dress designers, backed no doubt by the conservative tendency of the world, strove hard to keep fashion and hygiene apart. Trains appeared at the end of skirts already long, and women had to hold them up with their hands whenever they moved; high collars, stiffed with whalebone, were fitted close to the neck, and presently the hobble skirt, so narrow at the angles that only half a step at a time was possible, were superimposed. It seemed that folly could go no farther; and there were some in the feminist ranks who almost questioned whether women who would endure such clothes deserved their enfranchisement!

The war, however, brought deliverance. Under the necessities of the time fashion gave way, and short-skirted uniforms, and even breeches, became familiar sights. Women, when they had once really tasted the joys of this deliverance, refused to be put back into the old costumes. The trade tried, indeed, when the war was over, to reinstate the old ideas; but they did not “take.” Skirts grew shorter and shorter, clothes grew more and more simple and convenient, and hair, that “crowning glory of a woman,” was cut short. With one bound the young women of 1919 burst out from the hampering conventions, and with their
cigarettes, their motor-cars, their latch-keys, and their athletics they astonished and scandalized their elders.

—Ray Strachey, “The Cause” (1928)

Even before the war Bohemian and intellectual women had bobbed their hair. . . . By the middle of 1918 we began to find jokes about young women whose contribution to war work had consisted in cutting off their hair—that is, in having it bobbed. . . . In times of war and social upheaval the tendency for women to cut off their hair seems to be almost irresistible, and by 1923 to bob or not to bob had become one of the holiday problems. . . . Meanwhile the bob, which did not suit all faces, was being gradually abandoned in favour of the shingle. . . .

In . . . 1925 came the first real signs of the cloche hat, a type of headgear which was to become the very tyrant of the mode for the next five years. It consisted of a hat with a very narrow brim and a crown which fitted over the head like a helmet. Such hats became universal, and as it was impossible to wear them with a bun or back hair of any kind, women who wished to be in the mode at all were compelled to cut off their locks. In vain old-fashioned gentlemen exclaimed that hair was a woman’s crowning glory; in vain old-fashioned ladies strove to find a hat which they could possibly wear. There seemed to be no alternative; and it is an astonishing thought that in the years between 1925 and 1930 the vast majority of women in western Europe, with the exception of Spain, must have cut off their hair.

The tyranny of the mode, however, was not yet satisfied and early in 1927 or late ’26 the shingle was succeeded by the Eton crop. Those women who adopted it cropped their hair as closely as a schoolboy, and, indeed, there was often nothing to distinguish them from schoolboys but their rouged lips and penciled eyebrows.

—James Laver, Taste and Fashion (1937)

Worse still, they were beginning to paint their faces. Before the war only ladies of doubtful reputation had done that. Nice women sometimes allowed themselves the discreet use of *papier poudré* on their cheeks and they used lipsticks, but they were white lipsticks and conscience was smoothed by calling them lip-salves. Now every girl used powder and lipstick, the latter of a red which Nature never knew. . . . It is said that if all the lipsticks sold in a year in the United States were placed end to end they would reach from New York to Reno—which (it was humorously remarked) to some would seem an altogether logical destination.

—*Between the Wars*

Up ’til the war the vast majority of men took it for granted that their wives would have as many children as nature dictated, and women accepted the idea that this was their role. But
after the war came the gradual spread of a realization that they could choose whether or not to have children and if so how many; moreover more and more couples began to believe that they should make this choice.

The change went hand in hand with a new frankness about sex—in particular, about sex from the woman’s viewpoint. This did not come about without violent controversy during which certain determined reformers such as Dr. Marie Stopes achieved an extraordinary notoriety. Her book *Married Love: A Contribution to the Solution of Sex Difficulties*, first published in 1918... attacked many of the attitudes to sex which had prevailed for so long. It challenged the assumption that a “nice” woman did not have any sexual impulses and that sex was a low and degrading necessity to a pure woman. It also opposed those who held that the control of conception was immoral, and argued that it was important for the health of the mother and for the happiness of the couple concerned that the births of children should be spaced.

By the end of the decade discussion of such matters had ceased to be questionable and had become fairly respectable. Family planning, as it began to be called, was accepted. It made a more significant change in the lives and status of women than any other single factor. Equality with men in the economic sphere had proved to be an illusion; the introduction of women to men’s jobs had turned out to be temporary; equal pay never materialized; equality of opportunity granted in theory had been denied in practice. But release from incessant involuntary child bearing—this was a reality.

—Noreen Branson, *Britain in the Nineteen Twenties* (1975)

Many young women seemed to be mistaking the meaning of their freedom, and to be using it only for excess of excitement. They spent the morning hours upon the make-up of their faces, idled through the afternoons, and danced the night. They discarded the semblance of manners and morals, and replaced them by licence and dissipation. These young women figured largely in the minds of the old-fashioned, who enjoyed the belief that the country had now finally gone to the dogs, and that the emancipation of women was the last manifestation of this fact. In reality, however, all this was ephemeral and unimportant, and was more a sign of the reaction after the war strain than of anything to do with the Women’s Movement. It passed and died down, and men and women turned away from the night clubs to the more wholesome light of day. And yet, in a sense, the pessimists had been right. The new freedom of women had destroyed the old ideal on which their fears were based, and it had banished the clinging-doll heroine into the shades of the past. Innocence, in the sense of ignorance, existed no more, but in its place there was that of which the pioneers of the Women’s Movement had dreamed, namely, the combination of independence with responsibility.

—“The Cause”
What makes you jealous? That depends on whether you’re a man or woman . . . or so researchers have long thought.

Traditionally, theories of evolutionary psychology assert that a man should care more about the physical act of a partner’s infidelity than the emotional aspect, because raising and protecting another man’s child does not perpetuate his own genes. Women, on the other hand, are believed to be more upset by emotional betrayal, as their evolutionary interests are better served when their mate is around to help raise the children. But Christine R. Harris, Ph.D., a psychology professor at the University of California, San Diego, challenged the theories in three related studies, all published recently in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

In the first study, Harris measured the blood pressure and heart rate of 43 women and 36 men as they imagined scenarios of their mates committing either sexual or emotional infidelity. She found that men showed a greater physical reaction to sexual infidelity, while women reacted similarly to both scenarios—with a slight tendency to react more like the men to the sexual infidelity scenario.

Wondering whether the men were simply more aroused by images in the sexual scenario, Harris removed the infidelity aspect and measured men’s responses to imagined scenarios, in which they had sex and also fell in love with their partners. In each case, men responded more to the sexual images—confirming Harris’s suspicions. A similar follow-up study of women found that 80% believed emotional fidelity would bother them more; however, their physical responses to both scenarios were the same. Surprisingly, those women with experience in committed relationships showed a significantly greater reaction to the sexual infidelity scenario than the emotional one.

“The results raise serious doubts about the veracity of the claim that men are innately wired to be upset over sexual infidelity, and that women are innately more concerned with emotional infidelity,” Harris said. Instead, her findings suggest that regardless of gender, our individual experiences play a major role in determining our desires and reactions.

MEN, WOMEN, MARRIAGE, AND INFIDELITY
Observations from The Constant Wife and Some Interpretation

COMPILED BY STEPHANIE WOO

Constance: I may be unfaithful, but I am constant.

Marriage is a very good thing, but I think it’s a mistake to make a habit of it.
—W. Somerset Maugham

Woman wants monogamy;
Man delights in novelty.
Love is woman’s moon and sun;
Man has other forms of fun.
Woman lives but in her lord;
Count to ten, and man is bored.
With this the gist and sum of it,
What earthly good can come of it?”
—“General Review of the Sex Situation,” Dorothy Parker (Enough Rope, 1926)

Mrs. Culver: It was very naughty of John to deceive you, but he’s sorry for what he did and he’s been punished for it. It was all very dreadful and caused us a great deal of pain. But a man’s a man and you expect that kind of thing from him. There are excuses for him. There are none for a woman. Men are naturally polygamous and sensible women have always made allowances for their occasional lapse from a condition which modern civilization has forced on them. Women are monogamous. They do not naturally desire more than one man.

Hogamous, higamous
Men are polygamous.
Higamous, hogamous
Women monogamous.
—William James
John: Of course I am not so silly as to think that because a man and a woman go away together it is necessary to believe the worst about them, but you can’t deny that it is rather unconventional. I wouldn’t for a moment suggest that there’ll be anything between you, but it’s inevitable that ordinary persons should think there was.

Constance: I’ve always thought that ordinary persons had more sense than the clever ones are ready to credit them with.

[S]ociety now allows women and men more opportunity to become friends, especially at work. The fat-cat boss leering at his secretary has been replaced by men and women working as equals—and all too often falling in love as equals. . . . In the past, women would have “emotional affairs,” but they wouldn't have intercourse, because there was too great a price to pay—the “double standard” and all that. But now they’ve had more premarital sex, so they’re less inhibited, and they’ve got economic independence and the autonomy that goes with it.

—“When A Woman Strays,” by Joseph Hooper, Elle magazine (2003)

It is not a lack of love, but a lack of friendship that makes unhappy marriages.

—Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche

And when people leave their marriages, and the relationship’s in the light of day, a lot of the passion disappears.


Marriage is for women the commonest mode of livelihood, and the total amount of undesired sex endured by women is probably greater in marriage than in prostitution.

—Bertrand Arthur William Russell, Marriage and Morals (1929)

If there be no great love in the beginning, yet heaven may decrease it upon better acquaintance, when we are married and have more occasion to know one another: I hope, upon familiarity will grow more contempt.

—William Shakespeare, The Merry Wives of Windsor

Constance: Once more before it’s too late I want to feel about me the arms of a man who adores the ground I walk on. I want to see his face light up when I enter the room. I want to feel the pressure of his hand when we look at the moon together and the pleasantly tick-
ling sensation when his arm tremulously steals around my waist. I want to walk along
country lanes holding hands and I want to be called by absurd pet names. I want to talk
baby-talk by the hour together. . . . Do you grudge it me? I want to be loved.

I see women today deciding to have affairs the way they decide to go back to school or get
a job or have a baby: If you don't get what you need completely from marriage, you go and
get it from a lover.

—“When a Woman Strays”

Wives who want a good time do not necessarily want sex. More often, they fall for men
who make them feel high and giddy like schoolgirls again.

It is easier to catch unfaithful wives red-handed than unfaithful husbands because
women are, by nature, very trusting.

They tend to let slip damning details of their dalliances because, unlike men, they are
more prone to opening up to strangers who lend them a sympathetic ear or shoulder to cry
on—including undercover detectives engaged by their husbands.

[N]urses and policewomen are hardest to nab because they are acutely streetsmart.


constance: Desire is fleeting. It comes and goes and no man can understand why. The
only thing that’s certain is that when it’s gone it’s gone forever. So long as John continues
to provide for me what right have I to complain that he is unfaithful to me? He bought a
toy and if he no longer wants to play with it why should he? He paid for it.

constance: When you’ve had time to reflect you’ll realize that you have no reason to
blame me. After all, I’m taking from you nothing that you want.

There was something exhilarating, too, about knowing that my husband had been untrue:
it permitted me to think about what I really wanted for myself, about the person I wanted
to become, about the life I wanted to lead. When he came home from work, I no longer
necessarily stopped reading my book. When he came home from work, I no longer
necessarily was home.

—Adultery, by Louise DeSalvo (1999)

Women who are more likely to stray are those with a lot of pride. In fact, they are like men
in that they are the domineering one in the marriage. They may look very feminine and
gentle on the outside, but possess great inner strength. If the world fell apart about them, they would still remain standing.

—“Cheating Wives on the Rise”

Men and women tend to define affairs differently. Chances are, anyone not in an affair will take a harder stand on where lines should be drawn than someone who is.

—*The Complete Idiot's Guide to Affair-proof Love*

Those who are faithful know only the trivial side of love: it is the faithless who know love’s tragedies.

—Oscar Wilde

No lover, if he be of good faith, and sincere, will deny he would prefer to see his mistress dead than unfaithful.

—Marquis de Sade

**constance:** When I look into my heart I can't find a trace of resentment, except perhaps for John's being so stupid as to let himself be found out.

**Mrs. Culver:** No sensible woman attaches importance to an occasional slip. Time and chance are responsible for that.

Men, especially, classify affairs as sexual relationships. They separate their desire for sex from the feelings of love they have for their wives and see no conflict between their commitments to their wives and their affairs. Women, who have a more difficult time segmenting emotions and physical desire, tend to cast the net more broadly. To many women, going outside a marriage for either emotional or physical gratification constitutes an affair, whether it’s their own affair or their husband’s.

—*The Complete Idiot's Guide to Affair-proof Love*

Never tell a loved one of an infidelity: you would be badly rewarded for your troubles. Although one dislikes being deceived, one dislikes even more to be undeceived.

—17th-century courtesan Ninon de Lenclos
constance: [Marie-Louise]’s not clever enough to acquire any ascendancy over him, and so long as I kept his heart I was quite willing that she should have his senses.

Men are more reactive to a perceived sexual threat, while women are more upset when their primacy in the relationship is threatened.

—The Complete Idiot's Guide to Affair-proof Love

constance: Don’t you think it’s a mistake for husbands and wives to take their holidays together? The only reason one takes a holiday is for rest and change and recreation. Do you think a man really gets that when he goes away with his wife?

Older men—those who have been married for ten years or more—are more likely to become emotionally involved with their affairees than younger men and are more likely to dissolve their marriage because of the affair. Most of these men also complain that their emotional needs were not being met at home.

—The Complete Idiot's Guide to Affair-proof Love

constance: Don’t you remember? You were getting rather flat and stale. Then you had an affair with Marie-Louise and you were quite another man. Gay and amusing, full of life, and much more agreeable to live with.

Women typically enter into affairs to satisfy emotional rather than sexual needs. For many women, the positive physical and emotional feedback they can gain from an affair helps them approach their primary relationship with renewed energy and interest.

—The Complete Idiot's Guide to Affair-proof Love

mrs. culver: If a man neglects his wife it’s her own fault, and if he’s systematically unfaithful to her in nine cases out of ten she only has herself to blame.

Affairees believe their affair is about themselves and not their partner.

—The Complete Idiot's Guide to Affair-proof Love

It is not true that if your partner is happy with you and your relationship that he would not have strayed. More than half of the men and a third of the women who had affairs said they were happy in their marriages.

—The Complete Idiot's Guide to Affair-proof Love
MRS. CULVER: I told my little friend that if her husband was unfaithful to her it was because he found other women more attractive. Why should she be angry with him for that? Her business was to be more attractive than they.

MRS. CULVER: I was brought up by a very strict mother to believe that men were naturally wicked. I am seldom surprised at what they do and never upset.

MRS. CULVER: It may be that with advancing years my arteries have hardened. I am unable to attach any great importance to the philanderings of men. I think it’s their nature. John is a very hard-working surgeon. If he likes to lunch and dine with a pretty woman now and then I don’t think he’s much to blame. It must be very tiresome to have three meals a day with the same woman for seven days a week. I’m a little bored myself at seeing Martha opposite me at the dinner-table. And men can’t stand boredom as well as women.

Family attitudes about sex are powerful predictors of whether you or your mate will be unfaithful. If either of your parents or one of your grandparents had an affair, you will be more affair-prone.

—*The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Affair-proof Love*

Today, hardly anyone bats an eyelid about people being unfaithful.

[Earlier,] your relatives and neighbours would frown upon you if you cheated on your spouse. Now, they may also be doing what you’re doing.

—*“Cheating Wives on the Rise”*

MRS. CULVER: We’re naturally faithful creatures and we’re faithful because we have no particular inclination to be anything else.

CONSTANCE: A man thinks it quite natural that he should fall out of love with a woman, but it never strikes him for a moment that a woman can do anything so unnatural as to fall out of love with him. Don’t be upset at that, darling, that is one of the charming limitations of your sex.

Nisa summed up in a few sentences a fine adaptive explanation for female interest in sexual variety—supplementary subsistence. . . .

As long as prehistoric females were secretive about their extramarital affairs, they could garner extra resources, life insurance, better genes, and more varied DNA for their
biological futures. Hence those who sneaked into the bushes with secret lovers lived on—unconsciously passing on through the centuries whatever it is in the female spirit that motivates modern women to philander.

—Anatomy of Love: The Natural History of Monogamy, Adultery, and Divorce, by Helen E. Fisher (1992)

There are many kinds of work a woman has to do, and she should have lovers wherever she goes. If she goes somewhere to visit and is alone, then someone there will give her beads, someone else will give her meat, and someone else will give her other food. When she returns to her village, she will have been well taken care of.

—Anatomy of Love

Certainly there is no evidence, either from biology, primatology, or anthropology, that monogamy is somehow “natural” or “normal” for human beings. There is, by contrast, abundant evidence that people have long been prone to have multiple sexual partners.

—The Myth of Monogamy: Fidelity and Infidelity in Animals and People, by David P. Barash and Judith Eve Lipton (2001)

A woman one loves rarely suffices for all our needs, so we deceive her with another whom we do not love.

—Marcel Proust

Perfection is what American women expect to find in their husbands . . . but English women only hope to find in their butlers.

—W. Somerset Maugham

I’d say we’re all human. But what I identify with is how women feel in our society—what it’s like to be raised to be good daughters, good wives, good grandmothers, and then you die. Now, we get lots of choices.

—“When A Woman Strays”

The human species is preferentially and biologically polygynous, but also mostly monogamous and—when conditions are ripe—avidly adulterous . . . all at once. There is no simple animal model that encompasses all of the “natural” human condition. Thus, in some species, males seek EPCs [extra-pair copulations]; in others, females do so. Which is the model for humans? Probably both.
Human beings use mate-guarding, frequent copulations, and also a hefty dose of social prescription—religious injunctions, cultural conditioning, legal restraints, eunuchs, chastity belts, female circumcision, and so forth—in efforts to impose their will (typically, the desires of powerful men) on everyone else’s inclination. Rousseau speculated centuries ago that primitive human beings used to be happy, free, and socially independent of one another, but that most of our misfortune arose when the first people began identifying things—including sexual access to certain individuals—as their own.

—*The Myth of Monogamy*

She’s unmarried. She told me that in her opinion marriage was bound to be a failure if a woman could only have one husband at a time.

—W. Somerset Maugham

Let us be very strange and well-bred: Let us be as strange as if we had been married a great while; and as well-bred as if we were not married at all.


That married couples can live together day after day is a miracle the Vatican has overlooked.

—Bill Cosby
A CONSTANT WIFE GLOSSARY

BY HANNAH KNAPP

“THE ACTION OF THE PLAY TAKES PLACE IN JOHN’S HOUSE IN HARLEY STREET.” Situated between Regent’s Park and Oxford Street, Harley Street is a fashionable area in London in which several of the city’s major hospitals are located and is heavily populated by members of the medical profession. Even today, many dentists and doctors have their offices there in residential brick buildings built in rows and separated from the sidewalk with wrought-iron railings.

“SHE TREATS IT AS THOUGH IT DIDN’T MATTER A ROW OF PINS.” Since the 13th century, calling something a “pin” has been a common way of indicating that it has very little value. Martha is outraged that her mother thinks John’s adultery is so insignificant.

“DECENCY DIED WITH DEAR QUEEN VICTORIA.” Victoria (1814–1901), the only child of Edward, duke of Kent (one of the sons of George III), became queen of England when her uncle William IV died in 1837. She married her cousin, Prince Albert, in 1840 and had nine children. During her reign, Victoria stood for modesty and practicality—particularly that of women. A wife’s duty was to stand by her husband, no matter what he might do to violate their marriage vows, from adultery to abandonment. Fashions reflected Victoria’s ideal of feminine modesty and motherhood, covering every part of the body and emphasizing womanly breasts and hips. Her son Edward succeeded to the throne upon her death, ushering in a somewhat looser era—but still not nearly as loose as the post–World War I era would be.

“OH, I’VE BEEN SHOPPING WITH MARIE-LOUISE.” At the end of the 19th century and continuing through the first few decades of the 20th century, women began to redefine their social lives in many ways. Among the most popular pastimes for the up-to-date British woman was shopping in the West End of London. At that time, shopping came to be seen as the quintessential leisure activity for middle- and upper-class women. And the West End—the area of London between Hyde Park and Regent’s Park, stretching to Holborn and Euston to the East—developed into a complete entertainment center for women with free time and ample resources. Department stores, teashops, resta—
rants, and theaters thrived on and fed the trend toward increasing public consumption of goods and services by women, and contributed to the emergence of a new female urban culture. Today, Oxford Street, Regent Street, and Bond Street remain thriving shopping areas.

“I’VE JUST BEEN TELEPHONING TO HIM.”
As Alexander Graham Bell’s invention swept the United States and Europe at the end of the 19th century, an entire network of national and private organizations evolved to manage the systems, switchboards, cables, and other details necessary to support telephone communication. At the beginning of the 20th century, large numbers of young women were hired to manage central switchboards. At the end of Act II of The Constant Wife, Constance calls Barbara by asking the switchboard operator to connect her to “Mayfair 2646,” Barbara’s street address, as addresses were originally used as telephone numbers.

“DON’T FORGET THAT MEN WERE DECEIVERS EVER.”
Martha refers to Balthazar’s song in Shakespeare’s Much Ado about Nothing (Act II, Sc. 3):

Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more,
Men were deceivers ever;
One foot in sea, and one on shore,
To one thing constant never.
Then sigh not so,
But let them go,
And be you blithe and bonny,
Converting all your sounds of woe
Into Hey nonny, nonny.

“THAT IS THE SOFT ANSWER THAT TURNETH AWAY WRATH.”
Mrs. Culver quotes from the book of Proverbs 15:1, “A soft answer turns away wrath, but grievous words stir up anger.” She is commenting on Bernard’s elegant side-stepping of Constance’s question by paying a compliment to Mrs. Culver, when he could easily have inadvertently insulted Mrs. Culver by admitting he did not remember her.

“WHEN I GOT DEMOBBED I HAD TO GO OUT TO CHINA AGAIN AND GET MY BUSINESS TOGETHER.”
‘Demobbed’ was common slang for demobilization of returning soldiers who had fought in World War I. Given the time period, Bernard would have been in his thirties during the
war, so the four years of fighting would certainly have interrupted his business affairs overseas, already long established by the time he was called up to fight.

“SHE MARRIED AN EGYPTIAN PASHA.”
‘Pasha’ was a title held by high officials in countries under Turkish rule, not Egyptian. Mrs. Culver is mixing up her British colonies and protectorates—not entirely unexpected for a woman who came of age during the 19th-century expansion of the British Empire.

“YOU’RE TAKING HER TO RANELAGH, AREN’T YOU?”
Ranelagh was one of three London polo clubs and regarded as rather grand. The first polo match in England was organized by Captain Edward “Chicken” Hartopp, who had read about the game being played in India, on Hounslow Heath (London) in 1869. By the 1870s, the game was well established all over England.

“HE WAS AS RED AS A TURKEY COCK.”
A provincial and colonial colloquial expression for blushing, taken from the brightly colored comb on a male turkey’s head.

“HE NEVER CAME IN TO SAY GOOD-MORNING TO ME BEFORE HE WENT TO THE CITY.”
The area known today as “The City” was once all of London, a space of one square mile that stretched from Somerset House and Lincoln’s Inn Fields in the West, to the Tower of London in the East, and to Grays Inn in the North, with the Thames forming a natural boundary in the South. As London grew, the City became the business and financial heart of the metropolis. The district continues to perform that function today.

“I DON’T KNOW WHY HE SHOULD SEND UP A CARD.”
The practice of “sending up a card”—giving one’s calling card to the butler to announce one’s arrival at another person’s home—was a common formality among the British upper-middle class at the time, particularly if the visitor was not a close acquaintance of the host. Given the way the other characters in the play come and go without sending up cards, however, it would have been unusual for a friend of Constance to do so a card. The fact that Mortimer has himself announced formalizes his relationship to Constance and John, preparing everyone for a confrontation of some sort.
“Marie-Louise rang up and asked if she might come and take potluck with us.”
This expression grew out of “taking one’s chance about what’s in the pot,” i.e., trusting to luck that whatever was for dinner would be good. Initially, it meant stopping by for dinner without making any special preparations for one’s arrival. In the later 20th century, however, it took on its current meaning: to bring your own dish to a dinner where all the guests do the same.

“Deign to accept the pearl necklace for which the wretch has just paid ten thousand pounds”
Ten thousand British pounds in 1924 would be the equivalent of £35,037.76—or US$57,688.26—today. This was, at the time, a good year’s salary for many professionals, and is nearly as much as Constance later makes working for Barbara.

“That would be too much like a dog in a manger.”
The expression “a dog in the manger” is used to describe a person who spitefully refuses to let someone else benefit from something for which he or she has no personal use: “We asked our neighbor for the fence posts he had left over, but, like a dog in the manger, he threw them out rather than give them to us.” The phrase comes from one of Aesop’s fables, about a dog lying in a manger full of hay. When an ox tries to eat the hay, the dog bites him, despite the fact that the hay is of no use to the dog. (From The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy.) Constance realizes that being angry with John for philandering, when he and she are no longer lovers themselves, would make her like such a dog.

“I’m very fond of him, he makes me laugh, and we get on together like a house on fire, but I’m not in love with him.”
A common expression at the time, “like a house on fire” means to get along very well, very quickly, or energetically. It’s ironic that Constance uses the phrase here, as it was often used to describe people who had just met and really “hit it off,” as we would say today—not couples who had been married for years.

“We’ve taken a house at Henley for August.”
Henley is a favorite holiday spot on the Thames, near London, Oxford, and Windsor. An international regatta is held there every July. Henley is regularly frequented by the affluent.
“**EYEWASH . . .**”
Probably originally a military term from the late 19th century, “eyewash” meant something done for effect, rather than utility. John is casting doubt as to whether Constance’s reason for continuing with her travel plans is true or just an excuse.

“**MAKE HER UNDERSTAND THAT I’M MORE SINNED AGAINST THAN SINNING.**”
John tries to soften the blow to Marie-Louise by putting himself in the same category as the pitiable King Lear, who, after being abandoned and betrayed by his daughters, cries, “I am a man / More sinn’d against than sinning” (Act III, Sc. 2).

“**HE WAS A.D.C. TO ONE OF THE GOVERNORS AND HE CAME HOME ON THE SAME BOAT WITH US.**”
“A.D.C.” is short for aide-de-camp, an officer who serves as confidential assistant and secretary to a higher-ranking officer, such as a general, or a civilian aide to an executive. Every governor of a British colony would have had an A.D.C. The term was adopted from the French around 1670.

“**IF YOU THINK IT AMUSES ME TO STAND HERE LIKE PATIENCE ON A MONUMENT AND HAVE MY LEG PULLED YOU’RE MISTAKEN.**”
A similar line appears in Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* (Act II, Sc. 4). Viola, posing as a man, describes a young girl who sits pining for a love she dare not admit (she is really describing her own feelings for Duke Orsino, who claims to be in love with another woman):

> A blank, my lord: she never told her love,  
> But let concealment like a worm i’ th’ bud  
> Feed on her damask cheek: she pin’d in thought,  
> And with a green and yellow melancholy  
> She sat like Patience on a monument,  
> Smiling at grief. Was this not love indeed?  
> We men may say more, swear more, but indeed  
> Our shows are more than will: for still we prove  
> Much in our vows, but little in our love.

Shakespeare also uses the image of Patience, whose figure was often depicted on Renaissance funerary monuments, in *Pericles* (Act V, Sc. 1): “Like Patience, gazing on kings’ graves and smiling.” Since about 1890, the expression “like patience on a monument” has been colloquially used to describe an extremely patient and long-suffering person.
WORKS BY W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

PLAYS

A Man of Honour (1903)
Lady Frederick (1911)
Jack Straw (1911)
Penelope (1911)
Mrs. Dot (1912)
The Explorer (1912)
The Tenth Man (1913)
Landed Gentry (1913)
Smith (1913)
The Land of Promise (1913)
The Unknown (1920)
The Circle (1921)
Caesar's Wife (1922)
East of Suez (1922)
Our Betters (1923)
Home and Beauty (1923)
The Unattainable (1923)
Loaves and Fishes (1924)
The Constant Wife (1926)
The Letter (1927)
The Sacred Flame (1928)
The Breadwinner (1930)
For Services Rendered (1932)
Sheppey (1933)

Collected Plays, Vol. 1 (Lady Frederick, Mrs. Dot, Jack Straw) (1931)
Collected Plays, Vol. 2 (Penelope, Smith, The Land of Promise) (1931)
Collected Plays, Vol. 3 (Our Betters, The Unattainable, Home and Beauty) (1932)
Collected Plays Vol. 6 (The Unknown, For Services Rendered, Sheppey) (1934)
NOVELS AND SHORT STORIES

Liza of Lambeth (1897)
The Making of a Saint (1898)
Orientations (1899)
The Hero (1901)
Mrs. Craddock (1902)
The Merry-Go-Round (1904)
The Bishop’s Apron (1906)
The Explorer (1907)
The Magician (1908)
Of Human Bondage (1915)
The Moon and Sixpence (1919)
The Trembling of a Leaf (1921)
The Painted Veil (1925)
The Casuarina Tree (1926)
Ashenden (1928)
Cakes and Ale (1930)
First Person Singular (1931)
The Book Bag (1932)
The Narrow Corner (1932)
Ah King (1933)
East and West (1934)
The Judgment Seat (1934)
Cosmopolitans (1936)
Theatre (1937)
Christmas Holiday (1939)
Princess September and the Nightingale (1939)
The Mixture as Before (1940)
Up at the Villa (1941)
The Hour Before the Dawn (1942)
The Unconquered (1944)
The Razor’s Edge (1944)
Then and Now (1946)
Creatures of Circumstance (1947)
Catalina (1948)
TRAVEL BOOKS, ESSAYS, AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The Land of the Blessed Virgin: Sketches and Impressions in Andalusia (1905)
On a Chinese Screen (1922)
The Gentleman in the Parlor (1930)
Don Fernando (1935)
My South Sea Island (1936)
The Summing Up (1938)
France at War (1940)
Books and You (1940)
Strictly Personal (1941)
Of Human Bondage (1946)
Great Novelists and their Novels (1948)
A Writer’s Notebook (1949)
The Vagrant Mood (1952)

SELECTED FILMS BASED ON THE WORKS OF W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

The Divorcee (1919)
The Ordeal (1922)
Infatuation (1924)
East of Suez (1925)
The Circle (1925)
The Magician (1926)
Canadian (1926)
Sadie Thompson (1928)
The Sacred Flame (1929)
The Letter (1929), La Lettre (1930)
Charming Sinners (1929, based on The Constant Wife)
Strictly Unconventional (1930)
Weib im Dschungel [German Version] (1931)
Rain (1932)
Our Betters (1933)
The Narrow Corner (1933)
The Painted Veil (1934)
Of Human Bondage (1934, 1946, 1964)
Three films have been based on Maugham’s masterful novel about the compulsive love of a crippled doctor for a coarse waitress. The 1934 film directed by John Cromwell with Leslie Howard and Bette Davis used the following tagline on its posters: “The Love That Lifted a Man to Paradise...and Hurlèd Him Back to Earth Again.” While Bette Davis was passed over for an Oscar nomination, she was an unofficial write-in candidate. The story was remade in a 1946 film by director Edmund Goulding with Eleanor Parker and Paul Henreid and again in 1964 by directors Henry Hathaway and Ken Hughes and starring Laurence Harvey and Kim Novak.

The Right to Live (1935)
Isle of Fury (1936)

The Secret Agent (1936)
Maugham’s stories “The Traitor” and “The Hairless Mexican” served as the basis for Alfred Hitchcock’s 1936 film, in which British spies are sent to Switzerland to hunt enemy agents. The film starred John Gielgud, Peter Lorre, Robert Taylor, and Madeleine Carroll.

The Tenth Man (1937)
The Beachcomber (1938, 1954)
Too Many Husbands (1940)
The Letter (1940)
The Moon and Sixpence (1943, 1959 [tv series])
The Hour Before the Dawn (1944)
Christmas Holiday (1944)

The Razor’s Edge (1946, 1984)
This modern classic in which an American soldier returns from World War I questioning the meaning of life was made in 1946 by Twentieth Century Fox, directed by Edmund Golding with a stellar cast that included Tyrone Power, Gene Tierney, Ann Baxter, and Herbert Marshall as Maugham himself. It was remade in 1984, in a film directed by John Byrum starring Bill Murray, Theresa Russell, and Denholm Elliott.

Dirty Gertie from Harlem USA (1946)
The Unfaithful (1947)
Quartet (1948)
Trio (1950)
Encore (1951)
Miss Sadie Thompson (1953)
Three for the Show (1955)
Three Cases of Murder (1955)
The Seventh Sin (1957)
La esposa constante (1959, tv series)
Adorable Julia (1962)
Finden Sie, dass Constance sich richtig verhält? (1962)
After the Fox (1966)
Up at the Villa (2000)

According to the Internet Movie Data Base (www.imdb.com), this film based on Maugham’s novel Theatre is scheduled to begin shooting in May 2003, directed by István Szabó and starring Annette Bening.
QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Of the three main female characters—Constance, Martha, and Mrs. Culver—which do you like the most? Why? Which of them comes closest to voicing your own ideas about gender roles? Do any of them make you question those ideas?

2. What do the arguments among the women in the play tell us about the social climate in the 1920s, particularly the differences between the older and younger generations? Are the differences of opinion strictly related to age? What other factors might be coming into play?

3. How is Constance’s acceptance of Barbara’s offer to work a radical statement of independence? Why would her working be a threat or an insult to John?

4. How are men depicted in this play? Would you characterize Maugham’s depiction of any of them as flattering? What is he highlighting or ridiculing through each of them? Do you sympathize with any of them? Why or why not?

5. Did the final outcome of the play surprise you? What surprised you most—Constance’s decision to take a holiday with Bernard? John’s willingness to take her back after she returns? The extent of Constance’s plotting and cool-headed logic? Or some other twist?

6. Why does Constance take the measures she does in orchestrating her escape from John? Why doesn’t she just leave with Bernard as soon as he arrives in London? How is she or isn’t she truly a “constant wife”?

7. In your opinion, have the social rules governing male and female infidelity changed radically since the 1920s? What were your thoughts about infidelity before reading or seeing The Constant Wife? Has the play made you think differently, or reinforced your ideas about what is classified as adultery, and what is and isn’t permissible? In what way?

8. How are the issues debated in the play about gender roles similar to and different from gender issues today? Are these questions still relevant in the early 21st century, or have other questions taken their place? Why or why not?
FOR FURTHER READING

ON W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM


ON GREAT BRITAIN IN THE 1920s


ON INFIDELITY


**WEB SITES OF INTEREST**

